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Interrogating Reciprocal Gaze:
The Animal and Human
in Contemporary Art

A thesis

submitted with creative work in fulfilment of the requirements of
the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

at

James Cook University

by

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Support for the completion of the thesis and practice was obtained via the following sources.

Fees:

Study was supported and funded by an Australian Postgraduate Award (APA).

Supervision:

Supervision was overseen by

- Professor Diana Davis – Principal Supervisor
- Dr Stephen Naylor – Associate Supervisor

Any other assistance:

Financial assistance for the exhibition, *Eye to Eye*, was provided by

- *The Dubbo Regional Gallery, Armati Bequest, Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo and Arts NSW* who provided funding for the exhibition, artists' fees, the exhibition catalogue and curatorial expenses in 2006 and 2007.

Financial assistance for the exhibition, *Face to Face*, was provided by

- *KickArts Contemporary Arts, Centre for Contemporary Arts, Cairns*, who provided funding for both the exhibition and exhibition catalogue in 2007.

Financial assistance for the exhibition, *Interrogating Gaze*, was provided by

- *Pinnacles Gallery, Riverway Arts Centre, Thuringowa*, who provided funding for the exhibition in 2007.

Declaration of Ethics

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement of Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (1999), the joint *NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics, Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (approval number H2103).

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Acknowledgements

I am indebted to many people who so generously helped me in the course of the research.

First and foremost, unreserved appreciation and recognition is due to my incomparable principal supervisor, Professor Diana Davis. The long and productive association with Professor Davis began with my Masters research and it has been a privilege to have continued under her guidance in this research. Her wisdom, knowledge and expertise have guided and inspired me over many years. I wish to express my most sincere gratitude for her grace, support, generosity and professionalism.

Most special thanks to Dr Stephen Naylor for his valuable assistance, contribution and support, particularly for the studio practice. I am especially indebted to Dr Naylor for his excellent photographic documentation of one of the exhibitions.

For their generosity and willing participation during the artistic process of the work, I wish to express my warmest thanks to Victoria Carless, Diana Davis, Margaret Genever, Anna Holan, Julie Poulsen, Jennifer Valmadre and Tess Wilson; also, importantly, Sophie, Sasha, Midge, Taku, Bachy, Julia, Betty, Kazi, Bogus and Bella. So too, much gratitude and appreciation go to artists Hayden Fowler, Rebecca Ann Hobbs, Kate James, Lynne Roberts-Goodwin, Lisa Roet and Yvette Watt who each so willingly gave their time during the course of the interviews and so professionally and genially participated in the exhibition.

For their assistance and support, many thanks are due to Dr Annabelle Olsson, *Airport Veterinary Surgery*, Tony Bond, *Art Gallery of NSW*, Lee Middleton, *High Scan*, Rae O'Connell and Russell Milledge, *KickArts Contemporary Arts Cairns*; Brigette Leece, Sandra McMahon, Kent Buchanan and Jessica Moore, *Dubbo Regional Gallery*, *Western Plains Cultural Centre*; Sally Brand, *GBK*

Gallery; Karen Woodbury and Jane Kirkpatrick, *Karen Woodbury Gallery*; *Criterion Gallery*; *Sherman Galleries*; and Louise Allgood and Anthony Edwards, *Pinnacles Gallery*, Riverway Art Centre. Thanks also to Michael Marzik, Dr Vaughan Rees, Professor Catherine Walthard and Ben Silberstein for their encouragement and help. A special thank you is owed to Lynda Coomber for her important contribution. I am particularly grateful to Anna Holan and George Holan who both contributed to the work so generously and beyond any expectations. Also, much gratitude and thanks are due to Professor Ros Thorpe, Acting Dean, Graduate Research School, for her support and work at a critical time of the research.

Finally, deep appreciation and gratitude are owed to Eike Prenzel for his significant assistance with the research and his ongoing boundless support.

ABSTRACT

The research considers and appraises issues pertaining to the human relationship with animals, particularly in relation to companion animals, primarily focusing on the nature of their non-verbal communication and mutual gaze. It applies a contemporary visual arts perspective to animal advocacy and to aesthetic and ethical questions implicit in the human-animal relationship. The research is developed from an analysis of the literature, which evaluates interdisciplinary and scholarly perspectives on animals across such fields as philosophy, anthropology, psychology and ethology as well as visual art, predominantly contemporary international and Australian art. It also builds from the context of the researcher's extensive experience and parallel interests in animals, animal advocacy and the arts.

The literature contextualises and defines the parameters and working principles of ethical aesthetics, impartial advocacy, imaginative insight and experiential discipline, which are interlocked with the key principles of reciprocity and participation, proximity, responsibility, empathetic agency, connectedness and continuity, subtlety and restraint that form the conceptual framework and the visual art questions, both of which are fundamental drivers for the research.

Specifically, the research probes the nature of the human-animal interchange and underlying relations, and the continuity evident in this exchange, by means of the reciprocal gaze, through interrogation of the engagement of visual artists with the sensitivities and aesthetics of such interactions. At the macro level, the research seeks to probe how a selection of contemporary Australian artists contextualises and realises the potential of the animal-human gaze in their artwork. Conversations with these artists together with selections from their work formed the basis for a focal exhibition, *Eye to Eye*, in which each artist interrogates the nature of the animal-human interaction, principally focusing on the animal-human mutual gaze. The works also connect through their conceptual bases of the

animal-human interface within the consideration of ethics and aesthetics as well as by their use of digital technologies.

Against the backdrop of *Eye to Eye* and the resultant analysis of works which explore reciprocity of gaze between the animal and human as evidence of the animal-human relationship, the micro level research focused on artistic work deliberately designed to re-align animal-human interactive looking and mutual gaze and, in doing so, to establish a more harmonious balance between the two. A critical phase in the methodology of the research is the prototype phase from which the resolution, scope and direction for the focus, media and methods are established for artistic practice. The public outcomes of this research are the exhibitions entitled *Face to Face* and *Interrogating Gaze* which comprise a group of installations, together with a series of wall works focusing on companion animals and their humans. This research questions the moral and physical boundaries of our relationship with animals, and, in redressing the balance between the two, recognises and celebrates the sentience of the reciprocal gaze.

The implications and future directions of the research offer possibilities within four key areas. First, the research provides a solid conceptual and practical base and impetus for further and ongoing development of personal art practice addressing the nexus of animal-human relations, particularly within the consideration of animal sentience, animal advocacy, ethics and aesthetics. Second, the research opens up opportunities for curatorial work particularly within the genre of contemporary visual art and animals and animal-human relations. Third, given the dearth of publications within the field of Australian contemporary art and animals, potential publication and/or publication collaboration on contemporary art and animals present a viable option to address the deficiency. Finally, within the emerging interdisciplinary area of animal studies, the sphere of the animal and animal-human relations and contemporary art offers significant potential for further scholarly research.

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